

Lessons From the Practice

My Own Awakening

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Viewing the recently Oscar-nominated *Awakenings* stirred emotions and memories I had not felt since 1959. You see, I essentially lived at the same institution that Oliver Sacks wrote about and that was portrayed in this movie.

Awakenings takes place at The Beth Abraham Home for the Chronically Ill, which is now the Bronx Psychiatric Institution, a part of Albert Einstein Medical Center. The movie takes place in 1969, when Dr Sacks used L-dopa to treat, and place into temporary remission, many postencephalitic patients with parkinsonism.

From 1955 to 1959, my mother, a Hungarian immigrant, was the Director of Nurses at this institution. Every other weekend, on school holidays, and for most of each summer, this institution was my "day-care center."

I am now a practicing urologist in Lompoc, California, and, in retrospect, I am sure that much of my motivation and tolerance for this geriatric-oriented specialty is derived from my contact with the "awakening" patients.

Most of the patients depicted in the movie were institutionalized for multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, parkinsonism, deviant behavior, senility (now Alzheimer's disease), and encephalitis. Many had relatively full mental capacity but were imprisoned in bodies that would not function in the real world.

My hours were spent sharing meals with patients and employees. I pushed wheelchairs when I was 9. I played dominoes and read numbers during weekly bingo games. I took piano lessons from a patient and played catch in one of

the yards with some of the patients. I also heard stories of a New York that did not exist as I knew it.

Medicine today offers America's youth very little exposure to illness and disability that might motivate them into a medical career. I wish that more young people could interact with patients without the hazards of liability or fear of contagion. I think insight so gained would certainly motivate many more of them toward careers in medicine and allied fields.

One of my proudest moments at the institution was an awards ceremony in 1959, before I moved to Ohio, when all of the volunteers were given service awards, and I was granted my honorary Beth Abraham volunteer pin.

Oliver Sacks's vivid descriptions in his book and Penny Marshall's direction of the movie recapture the nature of this institution for the chronically ill. Somehow, between the lines and the camera images, I kept searching for a 9-year-old volunteer.

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"Lessons From the Practice" presents a personal experience of practicing physicians, residents, and medical students that made a lasting impression on the author. These pieces will speak to the art of medicine and to the primary goals of medical practice—to heal and to care for others. Physicians interested in contributing to the series are encouraged to submit their "lessons" to the series' editors.

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